

## Book Reviews

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**Kate Hill (ed.), *Museums and Biographies. Stories, Objects, Identities*, The International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012, hardback £ 60, pp. x+338.**

Considering how closely related museums and biography are, it is surprising that a volume such as this one has not been published earlier. It seems as if the 'biographical turn' that has been so prominent in the social sciences during the last few decades (Wengraf, Chamberlayne and Bornat 2002; Roberts 2002; Caine 2010) has eventually reached the field of museum studies. But is this the case? I would argue that museums have had a biographical focus since their very origins. 'Collecting individuals' have been at the centre of attention, whether the phrase refers to collectors who founded museums or to museum historians who collected the biographies of noteworthy individuals – usually collectors – in order to argue for their qualities (connoisseurship being prominent among them) and their impact on shaping museum institutions as we know them today (e.g. Kemp 1990; Alexander 1983 [1995]; Caygill and Cherry 1997; Cabanne 2003). On the other hand, important individuals often became the 'content of museums', especially history ones: objects that could be traced back to some important man (usually) held – and still do – prominent positions in most museums. Indeed, I think that the fact that it took so long for such a volume to appear is mainly due to the effort museums and museum studies as a field of research have made in the last decades towards a non-biographical perspective, one where museum practices, 'ordinary people' and groups took precedence over 'famous individuals'. And it is now, when biography as a genre and a methodological tool has expanded its spectrum to include micro-history, the anonymous individual and groups of people that have been hitherto ignored by the traditional biography, that it is time for the biographical perspective to be an essential part of museum interpretation again.

What I found of particular interest in this collection of essays is the multi-vocal and multi-layered understanding of museums and biography. Each of the sections places the emphasis on a different perspective. As the editor argues: 'It became obvious as abstracts for papers came that this was ... a topic which was being interpreted by contributors in varied and complex ways.' (p. 3). As a result, the first section deals with '[I]ndividual biography and museum history' (Bodenstein, Burch, Gray) and examines how particular individuals have been identified with specific museums. The second bears the title 'Problematising individual's biographies' (Sheldon, Whitelaw, Sandino); its focus is on the life stories of individuals and how they can be used – if at all – to explain museums and their histories. The third focuses on 'Institutional biographies' (MacLeod, Miller, Abt, Rees Leahy, Whitehead) and examines the extent to which a museum can actually have a biography and how self-reflection is performed by museums as well as individuals. The fourth examines 'Object Biographies' (Tythacott, Françaço, Carreau, Elliott) and argues that the understanding of objects develops and changes, reflecting at the same time social and institutional changes; the fifth explores 'Museums as biographies' (Booth, Forgan, Starra) and therefore whether museums can produce biographical narratives and what kind of narratives these are. The sixth section, entitled 'Museums as autobiography' (Nemec, de Jong, Crooke), examines the role of museums in enabling people to tell personal and community stories in different ways. The book ends with a brief text by Donald Preziosi, who using the metaphor of the pantograph, attempts an in-depth, metaphysical reading of the book theme. He argues that museums are 'epistemological technologies of virtual space-time' (p. 324) that allow for multiple relationships to be built between the viewing subject and the object being viewed.

This is not a book about glorious individuals and their contributions to museums. It is a book that aims to explore 'how biography in and of the museum can be used to become more reflexive about 19<sup>th</sup>-century inheritance and to develop new ways of knowing' (p. 1). The authors use the idea of biography in a variety of ways: as a literary and/or historical genre that corresponds to a specific museum genre (e.g. Nemec); as an analytical category for understanding and interpreting museums, objects and relations (e.g. Carreau, MacLeod, Burch); and as a metaphor/trope that permits an alternative perspective on museums (e.g. Booth). In some cases, the authors support the biographical approach (e.g. Sandino), in others they challenge it for its perceived inadequacies, such as 'the emphasis on a single exceptional figure, the reliance on linear chronologies, the creation of a unified subject.' (Whitelaw, p. 76). However, the authors here all employ biography as a means of enlarging and enriching museum interpretation, of allowing for new readings of institutions and of encouraging alternative perspectives in the relation between people and museums. While in most edited volumes papers do vary in quality, in this case all of them are 'finely articulated and challenging' (Preziosi, p. 321).

This is not a book relevant to museum historians alone, even though it originated from a conference organized by the Museums and Galleries History Group in 2009. It is a book relevant to contemporary museum concerns, as it allows us to focus on people and how museums have been shaped through their agency, recognizing that the museum is multi-leveled, and museum discourse (material or not) includes everybody, from curators and collectors to visitors and communities. Instead of summing up the past, this is a book about what we can do with this knowledge for the present and future of museums. All the contributors, and indeed this seems to sum up their concerns, argue for the need to reconsider issues of agency, to broaden up museum horizons and to explore different actors of agency and their interrelation. It is about shifting the focus of museums from objects or people alone to relationships..

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**Jeffrey Hill, Kevin Moore and Jason Wood (eds.), *Sport, History and Heritage: Studies in Public Representation*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012, hardback £60, pp. x +283**

This book is based on a series of seminars presented between 2006 and 2008 and funded through an Arts and Humanities Research Council project 'Sport, History and Heritage' which sought to explore the synergies and inter-relationships between history, heritage and museology. The broad questions to be addressed were, as the editors note, what is sports heritage, who creates it and where is it going? The seventeen chapters of this book go a considerable way to providing some answers to these questions through an eclectic range of topics, approaches and heritage sites.

The chapters are organised under three sections, 'History, Heritage and Sport', 'Museums and the Representation of Sport' and 'Survivals and Legacies: Sport, Heritage and Identity'. Each section begins with an introductory chapter outlining the principal themes and issues to be discussed. Jeffrey Hill's opening chapter, 'Sport, History and Imagined Pasts' provides an excellent introduction to the book and one that is much needed given sport's proclivity to self-mythology, narratives of identity, regionalism and nationalism. As Hill points out, the history of sport has generated a multitude of myths and memories; its mediation through "heritage" thus needs to be evaluated with a view to the balancing of subjective memories and imagined pasts with historical fact. Many examples of the mediation of sport through cultural activities are reported in this volume. Contrary to expectation, the place of sport in the museum is shown to be not a new idea by Ray Physick's chapter on the Football Association Art Competition of 1953. This was organised to celebrate the Association's ninetieth anniversary with an exhibition that was displayed through a year-long national tour. Although receiving luke-warm critical acclaim it did, as the author notes, demonstrate that art could be taken into areas of population that had hitherto been ignored by the art establishment. This raises questions about the place of sport in museums, where a balance must be maintained between its value as a means of attracting new audiences and its inherent historical interest as an area of cultural history. The two are not necessarily exclusive as Neil Skinner and Matthew Taylor demonstrate in their chapter on the association of boxing in London's East End with ideas of community and identity which are, as they argue, fluid and layered. Evaluating the 'East End Boxing Lives' project they discuss the utility of memory in engaging the visitor in reflection while acknowledging that this may not necessarily offer an objective and scholarly analysis of the social history of boxing in the East End.

Introducing the second section, Kevin Moore provides an overview of sport in museums and museums of sport. While, it is argued, sport has traditionally been an overlooked element of cultural life in museums, there is now a plethora of dedicated sport museums. However conflicts between commercial considerations and social value and between academic and corporate values present challenges which are in various ways discussed here in chapters by Max Dunbar on the Everton collection at the Liverpool Record Office, Santiago de Pablo and John K. Walton on the Alaves Football Museum, Wray Vamplew on Britain's Golfing Heritage and Honor Godfrey on the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum. The shared theme of these chapters is of partnerships between sport governing bodies, external organisations and the tensions between history, heritage and commercial pressures.

One of the strengths of this book is that all chapters overtly address the issues outlined at the outset and that consequently the reader can dip in at any point and engage with the topic under discussion. In his introduction to the final section Jason Wood draws upon his personal experience as an archaeologist with an interest in the conservation of sport heritage sites at a time when old football grounds were in the process of converting to all-seating stadiums and the provision of corporate hospitality. In paying lip service to their own history, the self-celebration of heritage has become a characteristic of new corporate facilities that are culturally, and frequently physically, dislocated from their roots. Many display little regard for historic values and are guilty of misrepresentation, and, unlike museums of sport and museums with sport-based exhibitions, curatorial supervision is absent. The solution, in Wood's view, is to ensure that club or site histories are constructed through a celebration of local customs and memories, rather like the community-based boxing project described above.

The contributors to this volume are drawn predominantly from the academic field of sports history, with almost two thirds being based at De Montfort University. Chapters written by these authors benefit from deep understandings of the historical status of sport as a social and cultural tradition. Another group of authors write from the essential perspective of sports museums and it would have been useful to have heard more from curators in municipal museums about the challenges and methods of the representation of sport to local communities. A word might also be said about the monochrome photographs which often fail to do justice to the inherently colourful nature of their subject matter. Nevertheless, anyone interested in the history and heritage of sport will surely find something of interest in this book. If anything, its general leaning is towards heritage rather than history, but as Richard Holt remarks in his Afterword, for many people it is the heritage of sport which has become the more important.

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